



# The Influence of Public Cleansing ON THE Mortality of Towns,\*

BY

D. EDGAR FLINN, D.P.H., F.R.C.S.I., M.R.C.P.

**A** DISTINGUISHED sanitarian describes the process of public cleansing as "The immediate removal of all matter liable to pollute earth, air, or water." The word immediate has a pronounced significance here, for in the immediate removal of town's refuse and filth lies the essence of the benefits to be derived from public cleansing. No system of town cleansing, be it either public or domestic, can be maintained or efficiently carried out unless it be undertaken solely by the Sanitary Authority; for according as our towns grow, and dwellings increase in number, so much more difficult does it become for individual householders to dispose of their refuse. Again, it is a self-evident fact that the habits of the occupiers of tenement

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\* Read at the meeting of the State Medicine Section of the Royal Academy of Medicine, Ireland, February 10th, 1893.

dwelling-houses are a source of difficulty in the cleansing of all towns, be they large or small, and it is unreasonable to expect people to be cleanly in their habits unless certain facilities are offered them, and their houses and surroundings kept in a tolerable state of cleanliness by the corporate body. Of course in this question of public cleansing, the situation of a town, its water supply, the method of sewerage, the habits of its population, are each and all of them more or less determining factors in the successful carrying out or otherwise of a particular plan.

**Origin of Epidemics.**

It is an established fact that all our great epidemics have their origin in the laneways, courtyards, and alleys of our towns, and these are especially the localities where public cleansing and scavenging should be systematically and daily carried out. These places are generally the homes of our errand boys, dairy-men, van-drivers, porters, and such like ; and the dwellings and surroundings of this class of the population should be maintained in as healthful a condition as possible. When localities of the kind I have mentioned preserve a low rate of mortality, it follows that the dwellers in the better quarters of a town have a corresponding immunity from sickness and diseases, more particularly of an infectious character.

Unless it be in purely agricultural districts, it may be laid down as a rule that no appearance of truly local cleanliness can be maintained unless public scavenging, removal of house refuse, as well as the sewerage, is organised and carried out under the management and direction of the sanitary authorities. This, in recent years, has come to be an acknowledged fact, and the daily removing of house refuse is now, in a large majority of towns in Great Britain,

recognised as one of the most important duties of the Health Department. To this system of public cleansing the reduction of both the general and zymotic death-rate is in part attributed. Previous to the inauguration of the system of public cleansing and domestic scavenging now carried out by the Dublin Corporation, the cleansing of ashpits, etc., were undertaken by persons who contracted with householders for the removal of such refuse matter. This refuse was stored in laneways and yards until it was sorted of its bones, rags, cinders, etc. These manure depôts were scattered all over the city, and large areas of polluted soil was the result. This system had been going on for years, and no doubt it contributed to the propagation of infectious disorders, and helped materially to increase the death-rate.

Nor was this system peculiar to Dublin; other large towns in Ireland, such as Belfast, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, tolerated this vile and objectionable method of filth collection—a method, too, which gave to the Irish towns a reputation for uncleanness which was becoming proverbial.

The immediate removal of all refuse and filth is the most essential element in the public cleansing of towns. Even to deposit refuse temporarily on the ground is dangerous, as the atmosphere of the dwelling-house is very much affected by the state of the atmosphere of the soil near it. If the soil near a dwelling is allowed to become impregnated with refuse and filth, which is so often cast out of houses of the tenement order, the air must naturally become polluted, and will carry the germs of many diseases to houses at a distance: public cleansing, then, cannot be too

strictly enforced, and its thorough administration becomes year after year more apparent and more necessary for the health of the people and the prevention of disease.

It is a matter of notoriety that since the entire scavenging and cleansing of the city of Dublin, both public and domestic, was undertaken by the Corporation, the rate of mortality from diseases of a zymotic nature has visibly decreased. Nottingham, Oldham, Plymouth, Newcastle, have similar experience.

Public cleansing  
in Dublin.

Sir Charles Cameron, our zealous and distinguished Medical Officer of Health, in his last issued annual report on the state of the public health in the city of Dublin, recognises the great advantage of public cleansing and filth removal. He says :—

There are few points in the sanitation of towns of so much importance as that of filth removal. It is of especial importance in Dublin. A large portion of the city is situated upon low-lying situations, and upon gravel and other soils of slight coherence. In such soils filth largely accumulates, and gives off offensive emanations into the overground atmosphere. The great sources of the filth of soils are the privies and ashpits ; their contents leak into the ground and stagnate therein. Every year we succeed in getting privies abolished and water-closets substituted therefor ; and it is to be hoped that in a few years Dublin will be as free from privies as Edinburgh now is.

I know of no sanitary work more important than this daily cleansing of the yards and sanitary accommodation of the tenement houses.

The Royal Commission that sat at Dublin in 1879, under the presidency of Sir Robert Rawlinson, C.B., and Dr., now Sir Francis MacCabe, the eminent Medical Commissioner to the Local

Government Board, commented in anything but complimentary terms on the then existing public cleansing and scavenging arrangements in the city, and one of their recommendations was that the entire cleansing and scavenging of Dublin, both public and domestic, should be undertaken and carried out by the Corporation; this recommendation bore good results, and the aspect of the Irish capital has visibly improved since the civic authorities undertook this responsibility.

The general death-rate has not diminished to any appreciable extent since this recommendation was acted upon, but the zymotic death-rate bears very favourable comparison with other large cities; of course it is evident that public cleansing is only one of the many reforms of a sanitary nature that go to assist in making towns healthful. Improved dwellings for the poor and the system of drainage are also important factors, and, no doubt, when the main drainage system is an accomplished fact in the city of Dublin, it will assist materially in diminishing the death-rate, both zymotic and general.

I have been favoured with a copy of the report for the year 1892 of the Executive Sanitary Officer of Belfast, Mr. Conway Scott, C.E. A system of public cleansing was only inaugurated in Belfast in the commencement of last year. In his report the executive sanitary officer mentions that so great was the amount of refuse that it took nearly four months to give the city its first regular cleansing, the cost being £2,169. Mr. Scott says that the sanitary effect of the regular removal of such a mass of refuse matter must be beneficial to the public health, and he asks the pertinent question: "What became of the mass of refuse matter in former

Public cleansing  
in Belfast and  
other towns in  
Ireland.



years?" One thing is certain, the greater portion of it never left the city. The same question might be asked as regards Dublin—where did the vast volumes of rubbish and filth collected in former years, before the Corporation undertook public cleansing, find a *locale*? Three-fourths of it never left the precincts of the city. The idea forcibly suggests itself, that some of the foundations of our newly-made streets, in the northern and southern districts of the city, may be in great part composed of this combination of rubbish, etc. Surely an insanitary foundation, and one that may tell its tale in the years to come.

The Belfast Corporation has recently undertaken the systematic removal of refuse from the dwellings of the inhabitants, and according to the report of the Medical Officer of Health for Belfast, the system has been attended with the best possible results, and is already having an influence on the health of the city.

The zymotic death-rate for Belfast averaged, for the ten years ending 1891, 3·5. In Dublin during the corresponding period the zymotic death-rate was 3·3.

In Cork, also, a system of public and domestic cleansing has for some time been put in operation, and the daily collection of house refuse is now undertaken by the Corporation. It has not yet been sufficiently long in working to speak of its merits, or the benefits accruing from its inception, but the death-rate from zymotic diseases is below the average in Cork, the rate being returned as 1·3 per 1,000 per annum for the year.

Londonderry and Limerick both show a low zymotic death-rate for the year 1891, the former

being 1·2 and the latter 0·9 per 1,000. In both cities improved methods of public cleansing have been in operation for some time.

The superintendent Medical Officer of Health for Kingstown also attributes the decrease in the zymotic death-rate of that town to the inauguration of a system of public and domestic cleansing wholly undertaken by the sanitary authority, the average zymotic death-rate for the past three years being only 1·1. In a recent report he states that "the zymotic death-rate has been on the decline, a fact that I can only account for by the introduction of an ably organised system of filth removal."

A word now as to the necessity of active measures in public cleansing.

The daily door-to-door collection at a stated early hour each morning, by means of portable dust-bins supplied by the authorities, and large enough to contain the refuse collected during the twenty-four hours, is a system working well in a large number of towns. It is certainly a vast improvement on the system of emptying all house refuse into an open ashpit in close proximity to the dwelling-house, where a fermenting mixture of dust and vegetable and animal matter is permitted to remain for a long period, creating a public nuisance and a danger to the health of a neighbourhood.

The daily door-to-door system.

The portable pail collection of house refuse should be enforced by every sanitary authority, for it appears to be the best and readiest system, each householder above a certain rating being supplied with a pail at a small charge, and the poorer class of houses being supplied with them free of cost. In small court-ways one large pail could be placed in a convenient position, and

would suffice for three or four cottages, or fixed ash-bins in tenement yards, capable of holding the dry refuse of eight or ten houses, and cleaned out daily, is a good and useful alternative; in fact, this would be preferable to having a number of bins, and would render it easier to keep a courtyard or laneway in a cleanly condition. These should be emptied each morning by the Corporation at a certain hour.

Vegetable refuse is a difficulty, and all sanitary authorities have more or less to contend with, as vegetables form an important part in the diet of a great majority of the people, the trimmings and parings of vegetables, fish, fruit, and the like, constituting a most unwholesome form of nuisance, and requiring to be promptly dealt with.

Regarding this class of refuse, it is of the utmost importance that authorities should insist upon its immediate removal, as it is a prolific source of disseminating foul and offensive odours, more especially when allowed to remain for any length of time exposed to the atmosphere, and is a menacing danger to the public health.

The pail system of daily refuse removal from the houses of the poorer classes is of decided advantage, more especially if the water system of removal of excreta is not available. This system answers admirably in some large towns in England and Scotland—notably Leeds, Nottingham, Rochdale, Glasgow, Edinburgh. It is a matter for regret that the pail system has not found more favour in Ireland. It has apparent advantages, and might be applied to a number of small towns in Ireland with great benefit, and its adoption would be speedily followed by a decrease in the number of those diseases which



go to augment the death-rate in most of our Irish towns and villages.

To aid in the fulfilment of the benefits to be derived from public cleansing, the domestic cleansing of the houses of the poorer classes is a necessary adjunct, and they must be taught that the initial principles of sanitary work commences in the individual house. The destruction of the first germ of disease is of the utmost importance, and it is to the houses of those resident in the courts and laneways of our cities and towns that the lesson should be taught that national health lies in the individual cleanliness and surroundings of the house and its inmates. Take the home of a steady, industrious artisan, and note the air of cleanliness existing there; note the cleanly wife and mother, and inquire have they had much illness in their midst? whether they have lost any of their children by any of the infectious disorders (whose abode is always to be found in the midst of filth and overcrowding), and you will most likely be answered in the negative; but pay a visit to the next-door neighbour, whose children betoken the little care bestowed on them, and you will find all the elements of domestic cleanliness absent, and King Filth reigns supreme.

Truly may it be said that—

“The web of our life is of a mingled yarn,  
Good and ill together,”

and our homes are liable at any moment to be invaded with a malady contracted or borne perhaps from the bye-lanes or courtways close by, hence it is vitally important that our poor neighbours should have every advantage offered them to keep their homes and surroundings in a sanitary and cleanly condition.

